How Do Parents Choose Schools? Evidence from Choices and a Survey of Choosers

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MOTIVATION

Why study how parents choose schools?

1. Understand patterns of school attendance
   - Segregation based on SES and race
   - Access to high-quality schools
2. Understand possible impacts of school choice
   - Choice should improve outcomes that parents most concerned about
   - What are these outcomes?
3. Inform education policy
   - E.g., student assignment, choice architecture (information etc)

PRIOR LITERATURE

Analysis of choices made under centralized choice systems (“revealed preferences”)

- Relate parents’ choices to measured attributes (e.g., avg test scores)
- Builds on Hastings et al (2009), surveyed by Agarwal & Somaini (2020)

Surveys on what attributes parents value

- Kleitz et al (2000), Schneider et al (1998), Schneider et al (2000)

Survey experiments with choices over hypothetical schools

- Hailey (2020a, 2020b), Billingham and Hunt (2016), Haderlein (2020)

Qualitative interviews of families choosing schools

- Sattin-Bajaj (2014a, 2014b), Lareau et al (2016), Neild (2005), Andre-Bechely (2005)

Prior Literature - Key Findings

Strong evidence: parents choose schools that

- Are close
- Have high average test scores
- Enroll high-SES students

Mixed evidence: parents choose schools that generate good academic outcomes

- Abdulkadiroglu et al (2020)
- Campos & Kearns (2022); Beuermann & Jackson (2022), Harris & Larsen (2019)

Limited evidence: on non-academic outcomes

- Beuermann & Jackson (2022)
- Qualitative interviews

PRIOR LITERATURE - KEY QUESTIONS

Q1) How to interpret mixed evidence on academic impacts?

E.g., why aren't choices related to test score VA in NYC?

1. Preferences: parents don't prioritize academic outcomes?
2. Beliefs: VA $\neq$ parent beliefs about which schools generate good academic outcomes (unlike other settings such as Los Angeles and Trinidad & Tobago)?

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E.g., why aren't choices related to test score VA in NYC?

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2. Beliefs: VA $\neq$ parent beliefs about which schools generate good academic outcomes (unlike other settings such as Los Angeles and Trinidad & Tobago)?

Crucial to distinguish between these explanations:

- If beliefs: how are these formed?

  Information interventions: Hastings and Weinstein (2008), Corcoran et al. (2018); Bergman, Chan, and Kapor (2020), Ainsworth et al. (2021), Cohodes et al (2022)

- If preferences: what else do parents look for in schools?

PRIOR LITERATURE - KEY QUESTIONS

Q2) How important are non-academic outcomes to school choices?

Some evidence suggests important:

- Qualitative evidence on importance of non-academics (e.g., concern for child safety)
- Non-academic outcomes influence choices in T & T (e.g., not arrested by age 18)

PRIOR LITERATURE - KEY QUESTIONS

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But much unknown:

- Qualitative studies do not force trade-offs
- Prior studies have not separated preferences and beliefs
- Prior studies have not studied potentially key outcomes in US setting

  E.g., school safety and social well-being (covered in climate surveys)

PRIOR LITERATURE - KEY QUESTIONS

Q3) How to interpret relationship between choices and student composition?

Possible explanations:

1. "True tastes" for composition (Abdulkadiroglu et al, 2020)
2. Parents believe outcomes better in higher-SES schools. Possible mechanisms:
   - Perceived peer effects
   - Perceived correlation between composition and inputs (e.g., teacher quality)
   - Performance metrics (avg scores, ratings) correlated with composition

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Crucial to understand relationship between choices and composition:

- Relevant to segregation and policies designed to address it

THIS PAPER

We survey parents as they choose schools in a centralized choice system

Our survey collects information on:

- Beliefs about own-child outcomes at different schools
- Responses to hypothetical changes in student composition

We match these survey data to parents' actual school rankings

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We match these survey data to parents' actual school rankings

We build on a growing literature that links beliefs and choices

- Bachman et al (2022), Delevande (2022), Fuster & Zafar (2022), Giustinelli (2022)

THIS PAPER

We conduct two sets of analyses:

1. We estimate parents' preferences for various outcomes:

   E.g., Do parents choose schools in which they expect higher test scores?
   E.g., Do they care more about their child's test scores or non-academic outcomes?

2. We examine parents' beliefs about these outcomes:

   E.g., Do they expect higher test scores in higher-SES schools?
   E.g., Do they believe test scores affected by peer composition?

THIS PAPER

Main findings:

1. Parents choose schools in which they expect their children to fare well
   - Choose schools where they expect higher test scores
   - But don't choose schools with higher VA
   - Non-academic outcomes at least as important
2. Parents expect better outcomes in higher-SES schools
3. Parents believe (especially non-academic) outcomes influence by peers

OUTLINE OF THE TALK

- Setting & Survey
- Data
- Preferences
- Beliefs
- Conclusion

MIDSIZE URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

Centralized choice system (10+ years old, DA algorithm)

Survey target population:

- All grade 5 & grade 8 students (choose middle & high school respectively)
- All applicants to elementary schools

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Sent customized Qualtrics survey via email or SMS (translated into ES, ZH)

- Middle/high school survey (Nov 2021 - beginning of enrollment window)
  Contact rate $\sim$80%, response rate $\sim$30%
- Elementary school survey (March 2022 - after enrollment window closed)
  Contact rate $\sim$90%, response rate $\sim$45%

MIDDLE/HIGH SCHOOL SURVEY: FOCAL SCHOOLS

We elicit beliefs about 4 “focal schools”, chosen as follows:

Step 1: construct student-specific “consideration set”:

- Start with 3 closest schools
- Add schools predicted to be ranked in top 4 (based on distance, avg test scores)
- Add closest above/below-avg schools (defined by avg test scores)

Step 2: chose 4 “focal schools” from consideration set, as follows:

- Pair 1: choose schools at random from set of above/below average schools
- Pair 2: add nearest and furthest schools left in consideration set

MIDDLE/HIGH SCHOOL SURVEY: KEY QUESTION MODULES

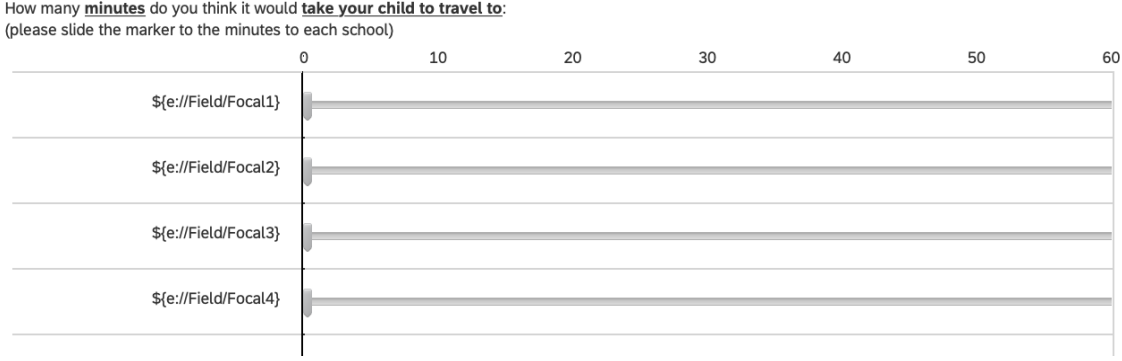
1) Elicit beliefs and stated choices about the focal schools

- Beliefs about measurable attributes (e.g., minutes to school, % FPRL)
- Beliefs about own-child academic and non-academic outcomes
- Stated preferences over the 2 pairs of focal schools

2) Present hypothetical scenario

- Ask respondents to imagine that composition of students at a school changes
- Re-elicit beliefs and stated choices

TYPICAL QUESTION STYLE



QUESTION WORDING FOR OWN-CHILD BELIEFS

Key questions:

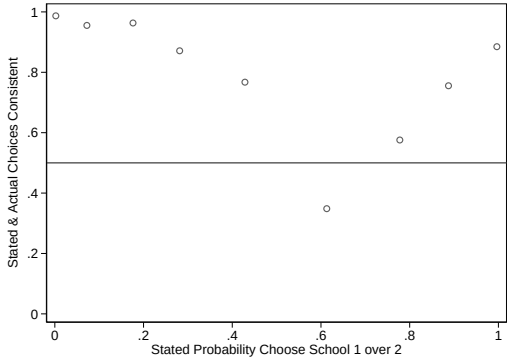
- What do you think your child would score in 8th grade if they attended the following schools from 6th grade through 8th grade: detail
- What do you think is the percent chance that your child would attend a 4-year college if they attended:
- What do you think is the percent chance that your child would feel safe at school if they attended:
- What do you think is the percent chance that your child would have a good group of friends if they attended:

SUMMARY STATISTICS

	All	Resp	Resp-All	Reweighted Resp-All
Individual characteristics:				
Disadvantaged neighborhood	0.21	0.14	–0.08*	–0.01
Black or Hispanic	0.35	0.25	–0.13*	–0.01
Test score percentile	50.2	58.4	9.86*	0.23
1st language English	0.47	0.52	0.06*	–0.00
Attributes of current school:				
Average test percentile	50.8	54.1	3.93*	0.66
Pct White	13.7	14.9	1.42*	0.26
Pct feel safe	56.7	57.6	1.09*	0.13
Attributes of requested school:				
Closest school to home	0.32	0.33	0.01	–0.01
Average test percentile	50.8	52.3	1.81*	0.42
Pct Free/Reduced Lunch	55.0	53.5	–1.87*	–0.32
Num schools listed on app	2.93	3.27	0.40*	0.34*
N	6920	1065		

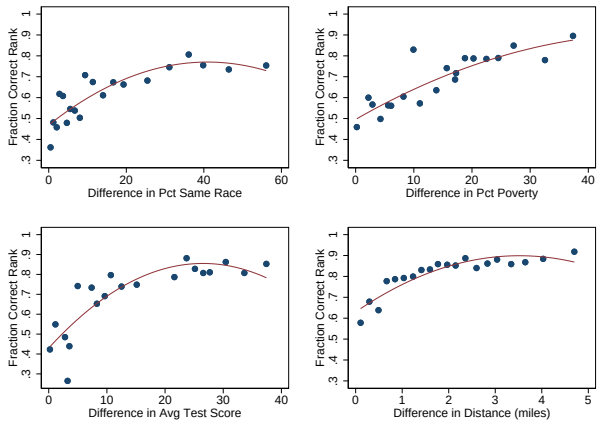
DID PARENTS TAKE SURVEY SERIOUSLY?

Evidence 1: stated preferences broadly consistent with subsequent requests



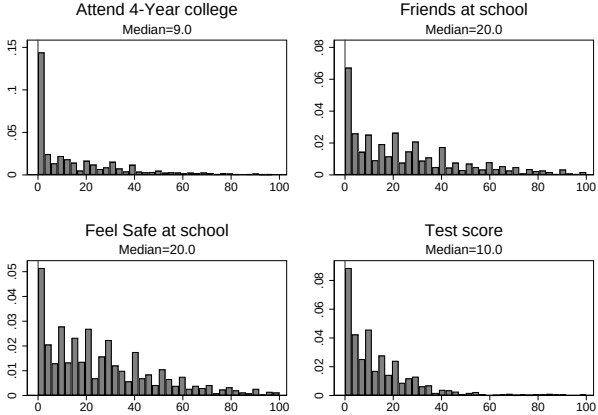
DID PARENTS TAKE SURVEY SERIOUSLY?

Evidence 2: some beliefs can be checked against data



STYLIZED FACTS ABOUT OWN-CHILD BELIEFS

1. Parents think that schools matter (“best” vs “worst” focal school)



STYLIZED FACTS ABOUT OWN-CHILD BELIEFS

2. Parents think that schools are multi-dimensional

Correlation matrix of parents' beliefs about particular schools

	College	Safe	Friends
Feel safe at school	0.545		
Good friend group	0.563	0.690	
Test score	0.584	0.472	0.451

STYLIZED FACTS ABOUT OWN-CHILD BELIEFS

3. Substantial - but not complete - agreement on which schools best for these outcomes

Fraction agree about ranking over specific pairs of focal schools

College	0.740
Feel safe at school	0.748
Good friend group	0.730
Test score	0.700

PREFERENCES - FRAMEWORK

Suppose households derive utility $U_i(D_{ij}, Y_{ij})$ from choosing school j

- D_{ij} is distance to school j
- Y_{ij} is vector of outcomes (e.g., child will feel safe at school)

Outcomes uncertain at the time parents choose schools

Households form subjective beliefs $P_i(Y_{ij})$ about these outcomes

By standard revealed preference argument, chosen school j^* satisfies:

$$j^* = argmax_{j \in J} \int U_i(D_{ij}, Y_{ij}) dP_i(Y_{ij}) \quad (1)$$

PREFERENCES - FRAMEWORK

Assuming risk-neutrality and additive separability, parents choose j to maximize:

$$E_i(U|j) = \gamma D_{ij} + E_i(Y|j)'\beta_Y \tag{2}$$

where:

- $E_i(Y|j)$ are beliefs (i.e., subjective expectations) about Y
- β_Y are preference parameters

PREFERENCES - FRAMEWORK

Prior literature uses data from centralized choice systems. Specify:

$$E_i(U|j) = \delta_D D_{ij} + X_j'\delta_X + \xi_{ij}$$

where:

- X_j is vector of measured attributes (e.g., avg test scores, composition)
- ξ_{ij} is an idiosyncratic i.i.d. EV1 error term

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Given model represented by eqn (2):

$$\delta_X = \frac{\partial E_i(Y|j)'}{\partial X_j}\beta_Y$$

E.g., Estimated $\delta_{VA} = 0$ could reflect $\frac{\partial E_i(Test|j)}{\partial VA_j} = 0$ or $\beta_{Test} = 0$.

PREFERENCES - FRAMEWORK

We use actual rankings to estimate β_Y by rank-ordered logit:

$$E_i(U|j) = \gamma D_{ij} + E_i(Y|j)'\beta_Y + \alpha_j + \xi_{ij}$$

where:

- $E_i(Y|j)$ are beliefs as measured on our survey
- α_j is a school-specific fixed effect

Note:

- The school FE captures common school-level beliefs
- Key identifying assumption: measured belief $E_i(y|j)$ uncorrl'd with unmeasured beliefs conditional on school FE and other measured beliefs

PREFERENCES - ESTIMATES

	Full sample		Survey sample			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Distance	-0.643***	-0.602***	-0.630***	-0.642***	-0.612***	-0.618***
	(0.00992)	(0.0156)	(0.0383)	(0.0401)	(0.0392)	(0.0396)
Test score				0.0421***		0.0195*
				(0.00808)		(0.00806)
College				0.0509***		0.0192*
				(0.00657)		(0.00801)
Feel safe					0.0305***	0.0230***
					(0.00401)	(0.00435)
Good friends					0.0504***	0.0448***
					(0.00490)	(0.00481)
N	71179	21876	3880	3880	3880	3880
Students	5931	5469	970	970	970	970
Schools	All	Focal	Focal	Focal	Focal	Focal
Var_FE			4.094	2.944	2.432	2.315

PREFERENCES - ESTIMATES

Key findings:

- Survey sample & focal schools capture overall preferences for proximity
- Var(estimated FE) falls by ˜25% when include academics, ˜50% when include both
- Households are willing-to-travel (WTT):
  - 0.02/0.64 = 0.031 extra miles for an 1 percentile point higher score
  - 0.25 extra miles for a 8 percentile point (1SD) higher score
  - 0.33 extra miles for a 10pp (1SD) higher P(college)
  - 0.5 extra miles for a 14pp (1SD) higher P(safe)
  - 1 extra mile for 14pp (1SD) higher P(friends)
  - Note: Avg distance to top-ranked school = 2.25 miles

PREFERENCES FOR TEST SCORES

If we replicate prior approach:

- Estimate $E_i(U|j) = \gamma D_{ij} + \delta_{VA} VA_j + \delta_C C_j + \xi_{ij}$, where C is composition
- Find $\widehat{\delta_{VA}} = 0.463(0.07)$ in specification without C
- Find $\widehat{\delta_{VA}} = 0.075(0.11)$ in specification with C

  $\Rightarrow$ Parents don't choose schools that have larger academic impacts

But already seen parents do choose schools they believe have larger academic impacts

- Our estimate of W.T.T. for higher test scores is 2* Campos & Kearns (2022)

Suggests beliefs about test scores $\neq$ measured VA (come back to this)

PREFERENCES FOR NONACADEMIC OUTCOMES

Already seen:

- Larger W.T.T. for non-academic than academic outcomes
- Non-academic outcomes explain more of variation in estimated school FE

PREFERENCES FOR NONACADEMIC OUTCOMES

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- Non-academic outcomes explain more of variation in estimated school FE

Can also evaluate magnitudes via probability of choosing a low-performing school:

- Consider a low-performing focal school (at random)
- Estimate probability of choosing this school vs other focal schools: $\widehat{\overline{P}} = 0.092$
- Estimate counterfactual probability of choosing this school given different beliefs

  E.g., Belief(test score) $\rightarrow$ max(test score): $\widehat{\overline{P}} = 0.109$

  E.g., Belief(safety) $\rightarrow$ max(safety): $\widehat{\overline{P}} = 0.163$

PREFERENCES - HETEROGENEITY

	Not Black or Hispanic			Black or Hispanic		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Distance	-0.644***	-0.652***	-0.630***	-0.540***	-0.560***	-0.528***
	(0.0440)	(0.0462)	(0.0452)	(0.0799)	(0.0835)	(0.0829)
Test score		0.0470***	0.0265*		0.0311**	0.0123
		(0.0105)	(0.0119)		(0.0116)	(0.0105)
College		0.0545***	0.0229*		0.0462***	0.0206
		(0.00816)	(0.0105)		(0.00978)	(0.0120)
Feel safe			0.0204***			0.0210**
			(0.00592)			(0.00675)
Good friends			0.0509***			0.0284**
			(0.00536)			(0.00996)
N	2964	2964	2964	916	916	916
Students	741	741	741	229	229	229
Var_FE	6.019	4.329	3.180	1.170	0.794	0.697

PREFERENCES - ROBUSTNESS

Examine robustness of preference estimates:

1. Samples (not restricting to complete beliefs)
2. Estimation methods (logit vs ROL, weighted vs unweighted)
3. Specifications (additional beliefs, alternative beliefs, alternative functional forms) detail

BELIEFS

We have seen that beliefs about own-child outcomes influence school choices

Q) Are these beliefs accurate?

- In general, we don't know "true" expected outcome
- For test scores, we can correlate beliefs with estimated value-added

Q) Are these beliefs related to student composition?

- Parents might believe outcomes better in higher-SES schools
- Especially if they lack information (Abdulkadiroglu et al, 2020)

BELIEFS

	Test scores			College	Safety	Friends
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
School Value Added	1.250***		0.351			
	(0.218)		(0.276)			
School Pct Black or Hispanic		-0.0867*	-0.0715*	-0.127*	-0.252***	-0.197***
		(0.0314)	(0.0309)	(0.0493)	(0.0611)	(0.0477)
Nbhd Pct Black or Hispanic		-0.160*	-0.131*	-0.251*	-0.272	-0.262*
		(0.0577)	(0.0578)	(0.0999)	(0.141)	(0.112)
N	24	24	24	24	24	24
r2	0.529	0.723	0.741	0.697	0.738	0.736

BELIEFS - PERCEIVED PEER EFFECTS

What explains correlation between expected outcomes and composition?

One potential mechanism: parents perceive peer effects

- “My kid’s outcomes will be better if attend schools with particular types of kids”
- Does not require actual peer effects

Perceived peer effects would have important implications:

- Schools perceived as good because of peer composition
- All else equal, policies that change composition change perceived quality

BELIEFS - HYPOTHETICAL SCENARIO

We present parents with a hypothetical scenario: full text

- Imagine changes to assignment rules changed composition at a particular school
- Specifically: imagine composition now similar to current school.

We then re-ask beliefs about:

- Composition: % FRPL, % same race as child
- Outcomes: Test scores, College, Safety, Friends
- Stated choice: % chance of choosing school

BELIEFS - HYPOTHETICAL SCENARIO

Strengths of this scenario:

- Plausible and policy-relevant (assignment rules do change)
- Arguably minimizes social desirability bias and experimenter demand effects
- Generates within- and across-parent variation in composition at a particular school
- Variation should not be associated with other input changes (e.g., class size)

Limitations of this scenario:

- Hypothetical - external validity?

BELIEFS - HYPOTHETICAL SCENARIO

Overall, parents revised beliefs about composition in line with true hypothetical change

- We measure change in beliefs as X=FRPL(post-change)-FRPL(baseline)
- We know true change Y=FRPL(current)-FRPL(focal)
- Regression of Y on X: Coefficient (SE) = 0.37 (0.0312), N=773

BELIEFS - IMPACTS ON ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

Revised beliefs about test scores vs revised beliefs about poverty and race college

	All		Not Black or Hispanic		Black or Hispanic	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Poverty	-0.0287	-0.0292	-0.0730*	-0.0464	0.0737	0.0268
	(0.0271)	(0.0265)	(0.0307)	(0.0310)	(0.0532)	(0.0505)
OwnRace		0.135***		0.137***		0.0962
		(0.0279)		(0.0299)		(0.0667)
N	766	755	560	553	206	202

BELIEFS - IMPACTS ON NON-ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

Revised beliefs about safety vs revised beliefs about poverty and race friends

	All		Not Black or Hispanic		Black or Hispanic	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Poverty	-0.192***	-0.188***	-0.236***	-0.178***	-0.0918	-0.142
	(0.0414)	(0.0402)	(0.0525)	(0.0516)	(0.0630)	(0.0796)
OwnRace		0.262***		0.305***		0.127
		(0.0388)		(0.0490)		(0.0746)
N	770	759	561	554	209	205

BELIEFS - IMPACTS ON STATED CHOICES

Can use hypothetical to estimate impact of perceived composition on stated choice: details

- Perceived ↑ in % poverty ⇒ ↓ in stated probability of choosing school
- Perceived ↑ in % ownrace ⇒ ↓ in stated probability of choosing school
- Estimates weaker for Black or Hispanic families

Can also check validity of estimates by comparing:

- Impact of perceived composition on stated choices (hypothetical)
- Impact of perceived composition on beliefs about own-child outcomes (hypothetical)
- Estimated preferences for own-child outcomes (earlier)

CONCLUSIONS

We find parents choose schools where they think their children will enjoy good outcomes

- Academic outcomes (including test scores) do matter
- Non-academic outcomes matter at least as much

Parents believe their children will enjoy good outcomes in higher-SES schools

- Some of this reflects perceived peer effects (especially for non-academics)

Implications

- Importance of beliefs about own-child outcomes - much more to learn
- Can potentially inform policy efforts that target these beliefs (e.g., information)

QUESTION WORDING FOR OWN-CHILD BELIEFS BACK

Every spring, students in [District] take tests in math and English. The same tests are used in every school.

A student's performance on these tests compared to other students can be expressed as a score between 0 and 100. Higher scores mean the student did better on the test.

These scores also tell you how well students did compared to other students in [District]. For example, if a student scored 75, it means they scored better than 75% of [District] students.

The next questions are about these test scores. When we say "score" we mean the average of math and English scores.

PREFERENCES - ROBUSTNESS BACK

	Full sample		Survey sample				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Distance	-0.643***	-0.602***	-0.630***	-0.642***	-0.612***	-0.618***	-0.597***
	(0.00992)	(0.0156)	(0.0383)	(0.0401)	(0.0392)	(0.0396)	(0.0397)
Test score				0.0421***		0.0195*	0.0193*
				(0.00808)		(0.00806)	(0.00901)
College				0.0509***		0.0192*	0.0193*
				(0.00657)		(0.00801)	(0.00824)
Feel safe					0.0305***	0.0230***	0.0257***
					(0.00401)	(0.00435)	(0.00457)
Good friends					0.0504***	0.0448***	0.0435***
					(0.00490)	(0.00481)	(0.00474)
Own race							0.0125**
							(0.00403)
Poverty							0.00783
							(0.00458)
N	71179	21876	3880	3880	3880	3880	3744
Students	5931	5469	970	970	970	970	949
Schools	All	Focal	Focal	Focal	Focal	Focal	Focal
Var.FE			4.094	2.944	2.432	2.315	2.233

BELIEFS - HYPOTHETICAL SCENARIO BACK

Key survey questions for hypothetical scenario:

- Baseline stated choice
  - Now imagine that you had to choose between **[FS1]** and **[FS2]**. What is the percent chance you would choose **[FS1]**: [slider]
- Hypothetical scenario
  - Now imagine that [District] changed the rules they use to decide which students go to which [middle/high] schools. Imagine this meant that students enrolled in **[FS1]** were **similar to students enrolled at your child's [elementary/middle] school in terms of social class and racial/ethnic background.**
- Revised composition beliefs
  - Taking this into account, what do you think would be the **percent of students at [FS1]** who are [first slider] low-income (eligible for free/reduced-price lunch) [second slider] the same race as your child
- Revised own-child beliefs and stated choices (similar)

BELIEFS - ESTIMATES FOR ACADEMIC OUTCOMES BACK

Revised beliefs about college vs revised beliefs about poverty and own race

	All		Not Black or Hispanic		Black or Hispanic	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Poverty	-0.0287	-0.0292	-0.0730*	-0.0464	0.0737	0.0268
	(0.0271)	(0.0265)	(0.0307)	(0.0310)	(0.0532)	(0.0505)
OwnRace		0.135***		0.137***		0.0962
		(0.0279)		(0.0299)		(0.0667)
N	766	755	560	553	206	202

BELIEFS - ESTIMATES FOR NON-ACADEMIC OUTCOMES BACK

Revised beliefs about friends vs revised beliefs about poverty and race

	All		Not Black or Hispanic		Black or Hispanic	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Poverty	-0.207***	-0.204***	-0.240***	-0.188***	-0.112	-0.137
	(0.0388)	(0.0372)	(0.0497)	(0.0465)	(0.0586)	(0.0695)
OwnRace		0.222***		0.271***		0.0615
		(0.0369)		(0.0453)		(0.0640)
N	770	759	561	554	209	205

BELIEFS - IMPACTS ON STATED CHOICES BACK

Revised stated choice (log odds) vs revised beliefs about poverty and race

	All		Not Black or Hispanic		Black or Hispanic	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Poverty	-0.0209***	-0.0211***	-0.0241***	-0.0217***	-0.0103	-0.0102
	(0.00347)	(0.00356)	(0.00437)	(0.00449)	(0.00530)	(0.00608)
OwnRace		0.00936*		0.0126*		-0.00363
		(0.00398)		(0.00516)		(0.00574)
N	664	655	473	467	191	188